

COMMENTARY

WHY THE KREMLIN EXTORTS CONFESSIONS

The Most Jealous God, the Cruellest Inquisition

MELVIN J. LASKY

IN THE light of all that was to happen during the great purge of 1936-1938, it is interesting to note that Stalin himself had earlier said: "A policy of chopping off heads is fraught with great dangers. . . . The method of chopping off and bloodletting—and blood is being called for—is dangerous and infectious. You chop off one head today, another tomorrow, another the day after—what in the end will be left of the party?"

Could this conceivably have been an ominous prophecy, to be understood only in terms of Stalin's familiar stylistic habit of posing himself rhetorical questions? He cer-

MUCH has been written about that bizarre Soviet institution—the "showcase" trial, in which people confess to crimes they did not do, could not have done. Some of the literature on the subject is sensational or romantic nonsense; yet, subtracting this, there still remains a considerable body of authentic information and plausible analysis on "Why do they confess?"—in any particular case, we now know of many methods that could have achieved the observable result. Yet that mystery dissolved, a tantalizing riddle remains, as MELVIN J. LASKY points out. Why does the Communist regime insist upon confessions that no one believes? When the last act has been written in advance, why bother to fabricate a tortuous drama? Mr. Lasky is the editor of *Der Monat*, a German-language monthly sponsored by the State Department which is widely regarded as one of the best periodicals now published in Europe.

tainly proceeded to answer it: blood did flow, heads were chopped, and nothing was left of the party—except himself. Is that what he intended, did he mean it that way? So precious little is really known about the man's motives and psychology. We can only speculate in the shadow of the remark which Souvarine has reported Stalin to have uttered, on a summer night in 1923, to Dzerzhinsky and Kamenev: "To choose one's victim, to prepare one's plans minutely, to slake an implacable vengeance, and then to go to bed. . . . There is nothing sweeter in the world."

To do a study of *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession*, as Messrs. Beck and Godin have done in an important book recently published by Viking Press, and to omit "the pock-marked one," sleeping securely in the Kremlin, is surely to do *Hamlet* without the Prince. They had, of course, no alternative. The authors, a "heretical" Soviet historian and a "suspect" German scientist, sat in the Lubianka, tapping on their cell walls in the old Russian fashion, gathering information from hundreds of "saboteurs," "spies," "wreckers." They admit their ignorance of what went on in the highest party circles, of decisive motivations and psychology. Nevertheless, despite this ignorance, it remains true that "no one knows what kind of government it is," as Tolstoy once wrote, "until he has been in its prisons." Echoing

this, the authors note that "without long residence in the NKVD cells it is impossible to find out what the Soviet people really feel and think," and have gone on to write the most thoughtful and stimulating book that has yet appeared on Stalin's terror.

This is not another personal story of torture and escape, but at long last a serious effort on the part of the victims to grasp the historic essence of what was happening to them. If it is not exactly history (who can do research in the Kremlin archives?) it is first-rate journalism and intelligent social analysis. After all, perhaps it is possible to find out the *meaning* of political events and processes without quite knowing, in any detailed or documented way, *why* they happened.

THAT Soviet Russia was undergoing some kind of deep transformation during the years of the Great Purge would seem to be undeniable. An estimated 5 to 10 per cent of the population fell into the hands of the secret police. An entire generation of leaders—in the Bolshevik party, in the army, in the universities and laboratories, in the factories and trade unions, in the secret police itself—was physically wiped out. Everyday life became a thing of terror. Children denounced their parents, famous men rewrote their lives, workmen were found to have attempted—according to their own confessions—to blow up Dnieper bridges with a gram of arsenic, mad scientists were found to have labored over test tubes to induce artificial volcanoes; a Jewish engineer was found to be designing a new institute in the form of what only could be—a half-swastika!

Against the backdrop of this collectivized dance of death, any single one of the two dozen explanatory theories which Beck and Godin have ingeniously assembled appears thin and absurd. An explanation from astrology seems no less inadequate than an explanation from economics, anthropology, or geopolitics. Was this a method of recruiting a cheap supply of labor power—by making available skilled engineers as common laborers? Was it simply an idiotic farce, an automatic working out of the denunciation

system, with the victims accumulating in geometric progression? Was it a violent cathartic for maintaining the open "circulation of the elite"—doesn't Frazer tell us about the ancient Roman custom of priestly succession by slaying predecessors? Is "Asia," with its terrible Ivanism, somehow a more illuminating suggestion—as if Caucasian Georgia were not an area with a tradition of gentleness and rich civilization?

Historical analogy and sweeping sociological generalization remain, and to them Beck and Godin finally turn. The analogy is in terms of "the Bonapartist completion of Stalin's personal power" in a court atmosphere choked with "Caesarean persecution mania": "When a fantastic amount of power had been concentrated in the hands of one person, such as the Roman Emperors, Ivan the Terrible, or Philip II of Spain, the autocrat had often developed acute symptoms of pathological persecution mania, causing him to mistrust even his closest supporters." Sociologically, the great Russian purges represent a phenomenon familiar enough to students of society: a neo-absolutist consolidation of centralized power. The lower ranks of the party and apparatus were supported against the senior privileged groups who had now become almost a mandarin caste. The result: "a bureaucratically controlled Oriental despotism, modified by the adoption of modern methods of production, technical aids, and methods of guiding the masses."

This way of looking at the matter is probably the best we can manage at the present time. It is certainly cogent, making use as it does of familiar categories. Yet perhaps it seems cogent only because the categories *are* familiar. That is the trouble with our theoretical speculations on the foundations of totalitarianism. One is never sure whether an explanation is true because it actually matches the way things really happened or merely because it fits into current and hence persuasive sociological formulas.

IT is certain, however, that our view of the historic course of this "second Soviet Revolution" has for too long been blurred by an

incredulous emphasis on the element of mystery in the melodramatic and preposterous confessions of Bukharin, Radek, and the other broken spirits of the Bolshevik old guard. World opinion could not comprehend that in Russia even confessions were no longer the private property of a man's conscience but articles owned and rationed by the state. Discussions of "Why did they confess?" missed the really baffling point: why did the NKVD bother with confessions at all?

There were thousands and thousands of them. "A rule to which there were practically no exceptions," write Beck and Godin, "was that no interrogation could be concluded except with a confession." The techniques of extracting confessions are no longer secret. In some cases there were the time-honored methods of the third degree—beatings, torture, spotlights. For the most part, protracted questioning, accompanied by sleeplessness and radical discomfort, sufficed.* But the most spectacular results were achieved by what in the NKVD terminology were known as "cultural methods." Here non-violent persuasion managed to induce voluntary admissions of guilt, sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of hope, more characteristically out of a dialectical devotion to the "party line" that lay in a residual fanaticism, an abject cynicism, and an obsessive sense of guilt.

In his book *Men and Politics* (1941), Louis Fischer reminisces of those days in Moscow: "The Moscow Trials and confessions were merely the sensational, highly silhouetted shape of an everyday Soviet phenomenon. . . . Millions of Soviet citizens live lies every day to save their lives and their jobs. They make false confessions day in and day out. They write lies, speak lies. They lie to one another and know it. They lie to themselves and get accustomed to it. They lose their illusions and succumb to the sole cynical goal of self-preservation until a better day. The assassination of character and the annihilation of personality is the dictatorship's chief weapon. . . ." And one "loyal

Soviet scholar," according to Beck and Godin, explained in his cell: "I was prepared for arrest. Why? Because, like all other Soviet citizens, I carried about with me a consciousness of guilt, an inexplicable sense of sin, a vague and indefinable feeling of having transgressed, combined with an ineradicable expectation of inevitable punishment."

The fiction of Arthur Koestler and Victor Serge has effectively explored the logic of submission to Soviet authority, as a result of which legends, lies, fables, the tallest of tales became commonplaces of the confessional. The creative imagination itself was enlisted in the tortuous process—the development is actually reported of "real artists and specialists in this line who were often moved from cell to cell by the magistrate for the purpose of helping with confessions." The regime even reserved the right to return unsolicited contributions, and there was established a standard of "acceptable confessions." Beck and Godin observe soberly that "great powers of persuasion on the part of the accused were often necessary to convince the examining magistrate of the seriousness and importance of a fictitious espionage legend and to get him to accept it."

The mystery, then, is not why the victims confessed—of this we have a clear notion; the real mystery that remains is why they were required to confess. Why did Stalin need their confessions?

IT IS true that in Russian law generally there is an emphasis on the ritual act of confession; but this constitutes an act of repentance "prerequisite to absolving the person," and serves to mitigate guilt rather than to compound it. Nor did the Soviet regime need the confessions, as Beck and Godin imagine, for propaganda purposes—for either "foreign consumption" or the satisfaction of the people's "ideological sense of justice." The outside world, able to check whether certain hotels existed in Copenhagen (the Bristol, alleged meeting place of the Moscow conspirators, had long ago been destroyed by fire) or whether planes arrived on certain dates in Oslo (Trotsky was supposed to have received

* An excellent account of how this works is to be found in Alexander Weissberg's *The Accused*, just published by Simon and Schuster.

mysterious air visitors on wintry days when not a Norwegian field was open), soon saw through the shabby fabric of the manufactured evidence; while the Soviet citizen, with a close friend or relative in some prison, could hardly himself be expected to take the matter as credible.

And if we concede the police's need legally to justify its method of operation to Stalin (who, in 1937, had publicly warned against "a mass witch-hunt"), there is still Hitler's example of the legalization of crimes by retrospective and retroactive legislation, and the rendering illegal of its victims' acts by *ex post facto* laws. Was anything more complex than this needed to fulfill that hunger for "consistency" which Hannah Arendt stresses as a major characteristic of the totalitarian world? How indeed was it that confessions, "voluntarily" given, nothing more, nothing less, were required and felt to be conclusive as well as indispensable?

Grappling with this most fascinating psychological problem in contemporary world politics, the authors of *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* scour history for a revealing parallel. There is, obviously, the Inquisition, and we are referred to the 15th-century handbook *Malleus Maleficarum*, which contains precise instructions for interrogation and the extortion of confessions. But this much has to be noted: the Inquisition's trials occurred in the framework of the traditional Church where "confession" was an institution and an established mode of individual behavior on the part of the believer; the aim of the confession, even when extorted, was also obvious—it saved the soul of the sinner from eternal damnation. In Stalin's Russia, no one would think of regarding "confession" as something having a supernatural sanction and an other-worldly function. It is something natural, of this world—yet without any apparent human reason. Those who confess will go down in Soviet history as treacherous beasts, which is what they might have expected had they never confessed at all.

The "best historical analogy," it is suggested by Beck and Godin, is the expropriation

and persecution of the Knights Templars in 14th-century France. But here once again we are dealing with phenomena as they occur in an ecclesiastical community. Nogaret, as the agent of papal decadence and royal greed, secures the necessary confessions (via torture) and the Crown proceeds to relieve the self-indicted servants of Satan of their revenues. The motives were utilitarian, the method traditional. Neither aspect fits the Soviet pattern. It could only be made to fit if we are prepared to turn to the explanation, repeated most recently by Isaac Deutscher, that the purges were truly motivated by the need to remove a dangerous governmental opposition. On this point Godin reports: "In the whole of my long prison career, apart from a few cases of frontier-jumping by minor Polish or Rumanian agents, I did not come across anything whatever that pointed to the real existence of any kind of counter-revolutionary activity."

I HAVE mentioned the totalitarian hunger for consistency, which in another and not less significant form appears as a hunger for *consent*. Consent, despite all his political successes, is what Stalin has never been able to command except by ruse and ruthlessness. The two great dictators of our time have both, after all, demanded 99 per cent approval in a public electoral show and have congratulated themselves on the subsequent almost unanimous mandate of the masses.

I doubt whether this was simply, on the part of the Nazis and Bolsheviks, the tribute that vice pays to democratic virtue. It was something more than that, something deeper. Totalitarianism lives only to a limited extent from propagandized myths. It feeds on its own pathological passions: it requires, in a world of enemies, its complete nation of friends; in a world of great danger and insecurity, its sense of supremacy among its own subjects.

In answering the question of why the NKVD took such trouble to extort confessions, the analogy of Jacobinism in the French Revolution is, I think, more revealing, and precisely because it is *not* parallel.

The "Law against Suspects," on the basis of which all "dangerous" elements could be guillotined without benefit of confession, was intended to protect the radical direction of the French Revolution. The Moscow Trials, in which all elements were required to proclaim their own guilt, were intended to protect the spiritual sickness of the once revolutionary Stalinist state. There seems to be a difference between the violent reprisals of a closed totalitarian regime and the terror of a still open revolutionary order. The revolutionary terrorists accept the fact of opposition, recognize their enemies, fight them, eliminate them. A revolution *needs* its enemies, but the Jacobin terror never stabilized itself sufficiently to allow itself the paranoiac luxury of inventing them.

In its own open period—the time of tangible class enemies, aristocrats, Whites, even kulaks—Bolshevism followed the same pattern. Enemies were fought and eliminated, not tricked and betrayed: no contrived confessions were needed, none wanted. Revolutionary drive indeed required victims, and opponents were legitimate prey in the arena of political contest. But under a totalitarian regime, where politics itself has been liquidated, enemies must be part of the whole official society, must repent and be absorbed—even if as corpses or prisoners. The totality allows nothing outside of itself. This is history's severest patriarchy, a closed house, without prodigal sons, where there is only the all-embracing father, his seamless web of power, and his devouring hunger for consent.

Qualitatively, Stalin's totalitarianism is a singular phenomenon, unique in human experience. Even the organized murderousness of Hitler's state assumed the objective recognition of opponents—the Jews were not asked to renounce Moses for Wotan! And in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for example, in the final section "relating to the judicial proceedings in both the ecclesiastic and civil courts against witches and indeed all heretics," there is a flexibility which appears to us almost as a kind of Inquisitorial liberalism. There is a method of passing sentence "upon one who hath confessed to Heresy, but is not Peni-

tent," another "upon one who hath confessed to Heresy but is Relapsed, Albeit Now Penitent," another "upon one who hath Confessed to Heresy but is Impenitent, although not Relapsed," another upon "one who has Confessed to Heresy, is Relapsed and is also Impenitent," and finally—as never happens in Moscow—upon "one Taken and Convicted, but Denying Everything." The Total Confessor of Moscow permits no impenitence, no denials, no relapse. The possibility of a man in his senses thinking differently from the state must never be acknowledged.

Mention might be made here of the new systematization of "self-criticism" within all the Iron Curtain Communist parties. What this really amounts to is the Moscow Trials in permanence! The German party has just completed six months of "self-criticism," that is, confessions of the card-holders to the high priests of the inner party. Again, what is wanted here is a complete and constantly reasserted ideological and spiritual monopoly rather than the mere fiction of consent. The party must own every subject every moment, in life and death—body *and* soul. Here is a sovereign more absolute than any Oriental potentate of history—a god more jealous and unforgiving than any Baal.

HOWEVER, it is one thing to say that the Stalinist terror is historically unique, and quite another to try to use this uniqueness for the purpose of surreptitious apologetics. Thus, it is often said that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia represent two "fundamentally different" types of government and ideology. This is a false and dangerous illusion. The *historical* uniqueness of Stalinism should not blind us to the fact that *morally* and *politically* it is identical with Nazism.

The roots of this error are, I feel, in the residual naivety of liberal idealism: Communism was always considered the perhaps hot-headed child of enlightenment and rationalism, while fascism was the black spawn of the nihilists. The socialism of Lenin and Stalin could only be considered as a vile betrayal of ideals otherwise valid. Thought

to be invalid in themselves and dangerous, on the other hand, were the ideals of the conservative and reactionary ideologues who, out of a pessimistic sense of man's imperfection, hoped for the preservation of older values in an organic, traditional community. The latter were the "children of darkness," the former the "children of light."

But I am afraid that in the perspective of today our shading of the picture must be a little subtler. Both movements, socialism and conservative-reaction, have their libertarian and their authoritarian potential. The great divide is no longer between Burke and the French Revolution, between the enlightened forward-lookers and the irrational backward-lookers. To be sure, differences continue to separate them; but the new and most vital consideration (the "fundamental" one, as we like to say) is the potential on both sides for the eventual association of brute force with an infallible ideology. Can we still feel charm in the rhetoric of Rousseau and Saint-Just, and dismay at the hardheadedness of Tocqueville and Burckhardt? Not by the color of their words shall we recognize our enemies, but by their ultimate willingness to accept ruthless violence in the service of a dogmatic social ideal.

The authors of *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* like to distinguish between the "rationalism" of the Stalinist authority and the "emotional sadism" of the Nazis. "Conditions in Soviet camps may in many ways have been quite as severe as those in Nazi camps, and yet they were of quite a different nature. Mass extermination of prisoners, experiments on them, giving them fatal injections, or making them do obviously useless work to humiliate them were things completely alien to the Soviet regime. Soviet severity was rational, not emotional."

But why should the fatal brutality of the Siberian salt mines and Arctic snow be considered "rational" or somehow more humane than the gas chambers? And isn't "completely alien" an unfortunate phrase when one thinks of the evidence of Katyn, of the Poles in *The Dark Side of the Moon*, of the NKVD state in Eastern Germany? However,

commenting on Felix Dzerzhinsky, father of the GPU, the authors quite correctly remark: "Service to an abstract idea can lead to cruelty on a scale which personal feeling is quite incapable of. That is the only explanation of certain aspects of the Soviet system." It is certainly a truer account of Dachau and Karaganda, Buchenwald and Kolyma, than the hasty distinction previously offered. There is a point reached by totalitarian coercion where neither "rational" nor "emotional" motives have any meaning. Differences in Communist and Nazi theory or in Russian and German practice become accidents of history. Was it "rational" to demand confessions? Most of the unfortunate victims were to have no public trial anyway. Would it not have been far more reasonable to be content with what naked power could accomplish silently and secretly?

THE Hitlerite eliminates millions of Jews out of pathological conviction that their existence is incompatible with the "new order" to be established. The Stalinist eliminates millions of kulaks and millions of "foreign agents" out of suspicion and fear that his regime is insecure. These are, at bottom, different convulsions of similarly diseased minds. What is basic to the affliction is the blood bond between violence and the abstract idea—the union of absolute power and an absolute ideology.

It is an illusion to believe, with Beck and Godin, that "the doctrine of the *Untermensch*, the sub-man, the intrinsically inferior human being, is completely foreign to Soviet ideology and to the Soviet idea of justice." In the total police state all men are sub-men, every individual is a potential *Untermensch*. Hitler came to understand this too. On the last day of his life, crushed in his Berlin Bunker, he pronounced that the Germans too were inferior, inadequate creatures, incapable of fulfilling the historic mission he had assigned them. But Stalin has always known the utter unworthiness of man, and as he listened to the confessions in the Moscow Trials from his hidden courtroom box, he must have felt that he had proved it.